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SUBJECT: Austrian Government Scraps Plan to Leave CERN (European Organisation for Nuclear Research)

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¶1. Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPO/Social Democrats) announced on May 18 that Austria will not/not cancel its membership in the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN). Responding to protests from the science community and from leaders of both coalition parties, Faymann overruled Science Minister Johannes Hahn, arguing that a withdrawal from CERN would harm Austria's international reputation. CERN proponents had managed to garner 30,000 signatures for an internet petition against the Science Ministry plan (COMMENT: a notable achievement given the mistrust of most Austrians towards nuclear energy and atomic sciences).

¶2. Faymann's intervention was apparently driven by a belated realization of the direct costs of withdrawing, as well as its impact on national science programs. Critics claimed that leaving CERN would cost the GoA some EUR 100 million (primarily to cover the Austrian share of the new Large Hadron Collider and pension/health insurance payments for Austrian CERN employees). Powerful Lower Austria provincial governor Erwin Proell (OVP/conservative People's Party) also opposed a withdrawal from CERN because it would threaten the MedAustron project in Lower Austria. Access to CERN is critical to developing the MedAustron center which plans to use ion-therapy in cancer treatment starting in 2013.

¶3. COMMENT: The CERN fiasco reveals much about the Austrian coalition's lack of internal coordination. A CERN withdrawal would have run against the grain of Austria's achievements in increasing R&D spending since 2006. As with the education reform debate, a government minister announced a new policy only to have it overturned after public outcry and political skirmishing among coalition parties. The headline of a popular tabloid captures the situation: "CERN Clash: Government in a Black Hole." END COMMENT.

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